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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions for ways in which private higher education institutions can work together toward common goals. The first part, "Common Framework," outlines a shared reform agenda. It identifies common commitments of independent institutions and stresses three shared goals: enhanced learning; a meaningful worklife for faculty, administrators, and staff; and financial sustainability. The second part, "Elements of a Collective Strategy," uses the metaphor of a "mutual self-help network," to build a strategy based on a common agenda and the three goals of the framework, on a commitment and willingness to share good ideas and practices with others, and on an interest in learning from others and the desirability of drawing upon the accomplishments of similar institutions. The paper envisions two kinds of information to be shared: information on effective practices and information on educational designs. The channels of communication for sharing this information will consist of three components: written materials, interaction with practitioners, and training. (DB)

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ED 435 299

Conversation Draft

October 1997

Designing the Future

A Collective Strategy for Independent Colleges and Universities

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To Leaders of Independent Colleges and Universities

At the heart of the work of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an ongoing process of listening to leaders of private colleges and universities. Over the past year, we have heard a growing conviction that present challenges create an opportunity, perhaps of a magnitude and depth rarely experienced, to enhance institutional quality and the standing of the sector.

Based on this perception and working with CIC's Board of Directors, we have drafted this paper to propose ways that private institutions can work together to become even more vital institutions during this time of transformation. We seek to test the idea that private colleges and universities are working on a common agenda and that such work can be strengthened by collective action. The paper contains two parts, a proposed "Common Framework" outlining a shared reform agenda, and "Elements of a Collective Strategy" describing joint initiatives, based on that shared agenda, of information sharing and program design.

The document has several potential audiences. The first is presidents of CIC member colleges and universities…you are the ones to whom we send the statement. It is labeled "draft," because we seek your comments and advice. We hope that you will be sufficiently interested in the potential joint initiatives that you will respond to the spirit and substance of the document. If these ideas resonate with your own, let us know. If they miss the mark, let us know that too. If particular points seem close but not quite right, we are interested in your recommendations for revision.

Importantly, we also see this as a public "conversation" draft. For example, you may find that the document can spur conversations that can be useful to your institution—a faculty retreat, cabinet meeting, or trustee planning session. We have also shared the statement with Deans Institute participants. We welcome feedback from any of those discussions.

We sense considerable promise in shared initiatives by private colleges and universities, and ask you to shape, and ultimately participate in, this work. Why now? A rapidly evolving world, coupled with shared institutional agendas and the availability of the richest package of communication possibilities ever, creates a vibrant space of opportunity. Independent colleges and universities can achieve new levels of quality and performance in this period, and in so doing enhance campus vitality as well as enlarge their already considerable contributions to the rest of higher education and to society.

Allen P. Splete

Allen P. Splete
President, Council of Independent Colleges

A Common Framework

Independent colleges and universities seem to be on the threshold of significant change. The driving influences are the same powerful forces profoundly affecting other parts of society, including the structure of the economy, technological development, demographic shifts, and cultural values. Many independent colleges and universities are taking advantage of the opportunities created to reform their educational programs and management approaches. They seek to become more vital, and in some cases transformed, institutions in a fast-moving and increasingly competitive environment.

The institutional changes under way are significant in several respects. At individual institutions the change is often fundamental, involving major improvements in learning or management. In addition, the pace of this change is much faster than in earlier improvement cycles. And finally, many institutions, instead of the more typical handful of experimental colleges or units, are engaged in this reform.

Private institutions, already alike in many ways, will frequently use similar strategies as they undertake these reforms. Out of this similarity, this paper proposes collective initiatives that derive from three commonly held goals: enhanced learning, meaningful worklife for faculty, administrators, and staff, and financial sustainability. These three goals, in turn, serve as overarching rubrics for specific areas for improvement. Taken together, these goals and improvement areas can constitute a common framework.

Common commitments of independent institutions

In putting together this framework we assume a similarity of basic institutional commitments. Indeed, for many CIC institutions, these commitments constitute a belief system that springs directly from institutional mission and tradition, underpins educational programs, and animates campus cultures. Similarity at this level of institutional commitment not only helps to describe the role of many private colleges and universities and to illuminate their definition of quality but it also provides a starting point for a shared agenda.

Independent institutions are characterized by...

- focus on learning and teaching
- belief in the importance of values in education
- provision of liberal arts programs, often balanced with professional studies
- attention to individual students
- genuine efforts to build communities of diverse learners
- small-to-moderate size
- cost-conscious use of resources
- responsiveness and flexibility
- service to society

Individual institutions and common frameworks

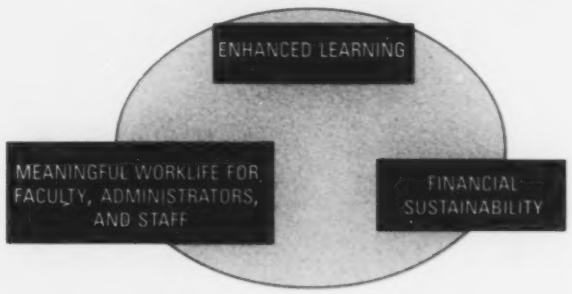
The underlying argument that independent colleges and universities have a number of commonalties should not obscure the even more fundamental facts not only of institutional uniqueness but of institutional responsibility for its own actions. Thus a key step in building a common framework is knowing not only the benefits of sharing but also the limits. We assume that each institution sees a common framework through its own lenses: particular mission and tradition, needs of its students, interests of its relevant communities, available resources and capacities.

What then is our expectation for ways this "Framework" might help an individual institution? We think there are two. First, this agenda itself can be of use—by showing an institution that others confront similar challenges and by suggesting some areas that might be added to an institution's own agenda. A college could view this "Framework" as a set of questions to ask itself, or as a guide for reflection on its quality and performance. We would expect, however, that each institution would eventually arrive at its own and possibly unique pattern of answers and improvements.

A second type of benefit can be joint efforts of information sharing or program development, and these possibilities are the subject of the second section of this paper, "Elements of a Collective Strategy."

Creating the framework: three goals

We start with a trio of goals that must be pursued simultaneously and in relationship to each other:



Seeing these goals in relationship to each other—almost like an equation—implies that institutions should seek positive change in each of these areas simultaneously.

The next few pages elaborate these three goals and then use them as overarching rubrics for thirteen specific areas of potential institutional improvement or transformation.

Elaborating the framework goals: areas of improvement

1. Enhanced learning. The central consideration, of course, is student learning. For whom? For what purpose? What topics? How learned? When? Where? Determined and shaped by whom? There is considerable talk at present about focusing on learning as well as on teaching. This proposed shift of emphasis is driven by several powerful developments—the greatest diversity of learners ever, fundamental changes in the nature of work expected of graduates, several decades worth of pedagogical experimentation (including most recently with various electronic possibilities), and a deeper understanding of the learning process itself. Dynamic private colleges and universities can be national leaders in truly enhancing learning. Most institutions will at least ask themselves whether they are addressing the following five areas.

- ***Learners***. The starting point for learning is always with learners. Seen in groups, learners increasingly demonstrate enormous variation in academic preparation, in cultural background, in motivation to learn, in economic circumstance, in learning style, and in time commitment possible. As individuals, at deeper neuro/psychological levels, they must revise existing mental models before new learning can occur. In general, therefore, any educational experience or program must take into account—as an initial and ongoing core consideration—who the learners are and what they bring to the learning encounter.

- ***Societal context for educational content***. An evolving understanding of the knowledge and skills society requires must, as ever, define much educational content. This will certainly include personal values, job skills, interpersonal abilities, and civic awareness for a diverse interconnected world, along with traditional disciplinary perspectives. For CIC institutions, often with strong regional ties as well as national or even international connections, this can often mean complex working relationships and partnerships with regional businesses, schools, governments, and community agencies.

- ***Holistic learning***. Particularly within private colleges and universities, individual learners can be seen as complete and complicated human beings, whose intellect, character, and psyche are all legitimate targets of education. Institutional attention to the co-curricular as well as the curricular, the off-campus as well as the on-campus, the practical as well as the academic, the emotional as well as the intellectual, the informal climate as well as the formal structure is accordingly warranted.

- ***Educational process***. Much recent educational ferment involves pedagogy and delivery mechanisms—collaborative learning, computerized and multimedia classrooms, service-learning, and distance learning, among others. A key emerging principle might be that, with appropriate guidance, students can accomplish a great deal on their own, with their peers, and via various information technologies. Indeed, we can imagine changes in direct student engagement with faculty and staff, more intense at some moments, with greater self-responsibility at others.

- ***Assessment of learning outcomes***. Being able to give evidence of learning is critical not only for learning itself but also for institutional improvement and marketing. Indeed, approaches such as assessing learning outcomes via individual learning portfolios may be linchpins in the present effort to emphasize learning as well as teaching.

2. Meaningful worklife for faculty, administrators, and staff. As designers and implementers, faculty and staff are indispensable to any educational activity. But these populations, like learners, grow ever diverse; and roles change as campuses change. A pivotal challenge of this period is likely to be the search for ways to balance both collegiality and timeliness of response, since administrators and faculty cannot afford not to work together in a fast-moving world. Much of the current discussion of transformation in higher education relates learning and costs, without mentioning the educators; but without a faculty and staff who find accomplishment and meaning in their roles, institutions are unlikely to achieve new levels of quality and performance. Accordingly, each institution will need a purposive, comprehensive, and coherent approach to the four items listed below.

- ***Leadership***. There are at least four key aspects of leadership in transforming institutions—presidents, the top leadership team, faculty, and trustees. Presidents whose institutions are undertaking fundamental change (whether incremental or intensive) may need support at several different levels—information and ideas, personal support, and opportunities to strengthen inner personal resources. The top leadership team (especially the president, chief academic officer, and chief business/financial officer) must work out of a shared understanding of opportunities and prospective educational designs. The faculty, as the basic crafters of the educational design, will require a kind of future focused, institutionally aware leadership. Trustees must establish a steadfast foundation (of purpose as well as dollars). Institutions will need to identify and support these kinds of leadership.

- ***Professional development***. Beyond leadership, participation of a significant number (on CIC campuses probably most or perhaps even all) of faculty, administrators, and staff will be necessary to develop the effective practices characterizing successful institutions. We think that many faculty and staff are aware of the necessity for major change and are ready to get to work on it, but they may not always know how or where to turn for help. Institutions will need to develop and support broad, intentional efforts to enhance the relevant skills of many members of the campus community, including those participating on part-time basis.

- ***Workload, incentives, and rewards***. As a counterpart to professional development, institutions will also need to develop appropriate understandings of changing work and responsibilities. Just as assessment completes (or perhaps propels) learning, the institutional reward structure—cultural as well as financial—can promote institutional priorities.

- ***Communication and decision-making***. Part of what makes change difficult is finding ways to reach decisions, often rapidly, while continuing to build community. Specifically, a time of significant and fast-paced change places additional burdens on institutional processes originally intended for more stable circumstances. All parties will need to attend to patterns of communication and influence, and invent new forms as necessary.

3. Financial sustainability. Here too, institutions confront an altered scene. A first issue is whether revenues (particularly per learner or unit of learning) are approaching a ceiling, at least for the kinds of education that colleges are currently offering. Specifically, tuition increases may be nearing a limit; government-funded student financial aid may not grow much more; fund-raising, endowments, and auxiliary enterprises may not result in orders-of-magnitude increases; and research or improvement grants may not be continuously available even to those who get them and they may not be available at all to many institutions. Overall revenues can grow, of course, if enrollment grows, but that should not be allowed to mask the relevance of issues of unit cost.

A second consideration is that not only have traditional costs been intractable in higher education, which has been a prototypical labor intensive enterprise, but also the rapid influx of information technologies has so far added an enormous expense. Those technologies probably hold promise eventually to save unit costs, but new "educational designs" may be required to realize those savings.

Third, cost pressures are arising from a newly competitive higher education environment, not only between public and private institutions but also between traditional higher educational institutions and corporations and other nontraditional "virtual" institutions. Most institutions will probably want to at least explore the following four financial issues.

- ***Revenue enhancement***. Within the overall context of limits on revenue, three core areas are strategically important—enrollment increases, auxiliary enterprises, and fund-raising. For example, larger enrollments are an obvious financial efficiency wherever there is excessive capacity. In addition, from the perspective of the entire sector, we think that private colleges and universities could profit from increased market share overall. One argument of this paper is that the enhanced learning approaches mentioned earlier can create an educational setting—individual institutions and the sector—of increased attractiveness. A second issue, highlighted by such realities as high levels of institutional student financial aid, is whether individual institutions, or indeed the entire sector, are priced strategically. Auxiliary enterprises, particularly those connected to the educational program, can deliver educational services to the community while providing additional revenue. Finally, our society, which has generated enormous wealth during the latter part of this century, may offer exciting new fund-raising potential in the near future.

- ***Structure of costs***. Higher education has a commonly accepted set of financial relationships that structure its understanding of costs—faculty/student ratio, faculty contact hours, credits per tuition, and others. Are these relationships the appropriate ones to connect learning, staff, and dollars in distance learning, or when students teach each other, or when students learn from multimedia resources, or when the educational program is premised on practitioners as teachers and mentors (e.g., adjunct faculty, internships, community-based service)? If not, institutions may need to rethink financial expectations, accounting mechanisms, and interpretative lenses for costs and revenues.

- ***Administrative processes***. There are a number of possibilities for rethinking current management processes, from student registration to check requisitions. For many, though by no

means all, of these processes, information technology capacity will be relevant; and administrative software vendors may turn out to be useful partners in this work.

- ***Strategic alliances***. Another promising direction is sharing costs (of design, delivery, and administration) with other colleges, businesses, governments, community organizations and schools. Obviously, such relationships can expand options and thus also improve educational quality. The possibilities range from shared staff, consultants, or vendors to group purchases to jointly developed programs.

It will be obvious that the topics captured here do not encompass the complete range of institutional activities comprising a truly vital institution. Our hypothesis, however, is that they are areas with extraordinary promise, particularly for private colleges and universities, as they move to new levels of quality and position themselves for success in the next century. These proposed topics, therefore, are intended to be strategic rather than comprehensive for individual institutions. They are also intended to be issues of concern to a wide number of institutions and thus are collectively strategic.

Elements of a Collective Strategy

We noted earlier that a common framework among independent colleges and universities might accomplish two things—provide grist for an institution's own reform agenda and establish a basis for joint action. It is to this latter potential that we now turn.

There are some obvious implications, for CIC as well as private colleges and universities, of a generally agreed upon agenda. At CIC's national office, we intend for the ideas in this paper to shape existing activities such as the Presidents and Deans Institutes and major project initiatives. Beyond that however, we propose here a more ambitious collective strategy, which would be complementary to but broader than current CIC programming.

A mutual self-help network

As a metaphor for this strategy, we have been envisioning a "mutual self-help network." For years, we have seen mutual self-help as a CIC hallmark. Private college leaders often compare notes, seek each other's advice, commiserate with each other, and trade good ideas, all of which gain meaning from the institutional similarities mentioned earlier.

This tradition of mutual self-help can now be much more highly leveraged with today's rich networking opportunities. Thus we imagine a dynamic network of presidents, deans, other administrators, and faculty sharing with and learning from each other in meetings, over the phone, in campus visits, via e-mail and listservs, through the mail, and via the Internet-based World Wide Web.

Conditions for a mutual self-help network

What would it take to achieve significant new levels of mutual self-help and networking?

Common agenda. We think that a common agenda is essential, so this draft paper tests the prospect that a considerable number of independent colleges and universities are working on and interested in learning about the three areas proposed in the "Framework."

Commitment to share. This strategy requires institutional leaders who work from a civic mindset—a willingness to share their good ideas and practices with others and a commitment to devote the requisite energy to that task. Thus this document also asks whether a significant number of institutional leaders are ready to share their good practices and ideas, for the greater good as well as for access to others' contributions.

Interest in learning from others. Even when some institutions have been willing to share, many others have shied away from adapting work developed elsewhere. But this paper is premised on the desirability—in this era of fast-paced change—to draw upon accomplishments of similar institutions.

If these conditions are true for a critical mass of institutions, we can then explore what kinds of information might be shared and how.

Kinds of information to be shared

We think that two kinds of information might be particularly useful—about actual effective practices at one or more institutions, and about new, untested ideas for educational redesign.

- ***Effective practice***

  Many independent colleges and universities have undertaken significant reform. Indeed, we are certain that at least a few private institutions have made real headway on each of the items in the "Framework" outlined in the previous section. The first critical step, therefore, is to identify these existing effective practices. Usual ways of paying attention (conferences, phone calls, reading, and Web-browsing) will be sufficient to identify some practices. More generally, however, we must devise more encompassing ways to collect examples. We expect that we can make use of such ongoing CIC activities as surveys, special programs (competitive proposal processes as well as eventual grantees), and awards nominations processes as well as simply asking that institutions propose themselves as exemplars. Another key strategy can be data collection, then comparative data analysis.

  Some additional effort will typically be required to make information about a given practice usable by other interested institutions. For instance, we must describe what constitutes effectiveness. We are consciously using "effective" instead of "best" to connote, in a fairly diverse system of independent institutions, a greater range of possible practices that can be useful to others. Describing effectiveness will entail defining quality and gaining an understanding of relevant standards. Moreover, institutions with effective practices may have conducted their own process analyses, developed guidelines for their internal use, and even conducted training for their staff; but simply sharing those existing materials may not give other institutions the types of information they need to implement similar activities. In some cases, this extra work could probably be done by those who developed the practice; in other situations an outsider, perhaps from an institution wanting to adapt the practice for their own use, can put the ideas in shareable form; still other situations might require an external consultant to tease out the more generalizable elements. A powerful strategy, based on our special program and project work to date, can be groups of institutions who have developed related solutions to similar problems combining their insights. A key point to make is that what often needs to be shared is not simply the concept or the results of the practice, but the processes that implement the concept and thus lead to the results.

  In assessing effectiveness, the three goals comprising the "Framework"—enhanced learning, meaningful worklife, and financial sustainability—can constitute evaluative criteria. We might analyze, for example, current practices (traditional classroom approaches or weekend colleges or off-site programs) to search for instances of simultaneous improvement in learning, in faculty/administrator/staff creativity and accomplishments, and in cost/revenue balances.

- *Educational design*

  Even though there is considerable existing practice worth sharing, we also think that some potentially significant practices have yet to be launched. The design of new or improved practice is clearly warranted.

  For example, can we rethink our use of student or faculty time, of location and learning spaces, of uses of technologies, of engagement with surrounding communities and organizations, of assessment for credit, among others. In this case, we propose that the three goals—enhanced learning, meaningful worklife for faculty and staff, and financial sustainability—serve as design criteria.

  It is important to note that we should probably not expect all of this to be given to us by outside experts. Rather, just as groups of institutions will need to pool their expertise to analyze effective practice, it will probably also be necessary to hold a number of design workshops at existing CIC meetings or ones organized specifically for this purpose so that individuals from several institutions can develop ideas for new configurations of students, faculty/staff, and other resources.

Channels of communication

We require robust means to share both effective practice and new designs. This final point is, in some ways, the linchpin of this entire collective strategy, since the kinds of significant change considered in this paper may need a sharing of information that is at once in greater depth, about a wider range of issues, and more widely and rapidly available to many institutions than current conferences, publications, and uses of the Internet allow. A complete sharing strategy probably consists of three components:

Written materials. These materials would probably be in both print and electronic forms, but the guiding metaphor for their construction and tone may increasingly be the electronic one—shorter, linked, up-datable. Both materials that give overviews and general information, and those that explain in greater depth how to implement something will be important.

Interaction with practitioners. At some point, institutions seeking to learn about effective practice will likely want some personal contact with those who have developed the practice. This might mean a conference presentation, quick hallway conversation at a conference, phone call, or e-mail exchange. It might even be a campus visit. This interaction can help institutions decide whether this particular practice is one about which they wish to learn more. Detailed electronic directories would be the starting point.

Training. In many cases, the two elements mentioned above do not provide sufficient process guidance for other institutions to proceed. What is often additionally required is face-to-face, structured guidance on precisely how to get going, such as several hour workshops at another conference or a special meeting devoted to this topic. Individual consultants can also so some of this, but we should be seeking more cost-effective strategies for individual institutions, as well as ways to help a larger number at once, since there are often not enough consultants to go around.

The promise embedded in this "Mutual Self-help Network" is audacious in its premise of synergy among a set of institutions. Indeed, at CIC's national office, where rests much of the burden to establish and maintain these channels of communication, we have at present only a general outline of how this will work. Yet the opportunities for such timely communication have never been greater. This unprecedented opportunity allows—perhaps even calls for—the creation of new precedents. We are eager to engage with our member institutions and their leaders in an act of such creation.

Immediate Next Steps

We seek your responses to this draft document by December 15, 1997, so that we can report on responses, perhaps with a revised version, at the 1998 Presidents Institute. The questions below may stimulate your thinking. We also intend to hold a discussion at the Institute on the next steps involved in establishing a "mutual self-help network."

Significant change	Are independent colleges and universities really on the threshold of significant change (i.e., fundamental, fast-paced, and at many institutions at once)?
Three goals	Are these the right goals (learning, meaningful worklife, and finances)? Does their interaction of create a useful frame?
Improvement areas	Are these the right improvement areas? That is, can work in these areas actually help institutions move to new levels of quality and performance?
Effective practice	How important is learning about effective practice? What kinds of information would you seek out, trust, and actually use?
Educational design	Are new approaches needed? How important is such design?
Channels of communication	How important is sharing information about effective practice and new design? What incentives will be necessary for institutions to share with each other? What forms of sharing can be most valuable?

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